



**The Center for
Family Justice**

Testimony Regarding

HB 5037, An Act Adjusting the State Budget for the Biennium Ending June 30, 2023

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Department of Social Services Budget

Appropriations Committee February 23, 2022

Good afternoon, Senators Osten, Kushner & Cicarella, Representatives Walker, Abercrombie & Betts, and members of the Committee. The Center for Family Justice provides life-saving services to victims of domestic violence in Bridgeport, Stratford, Fairfield, Trumbull, Monroe and Easton. Services include counseling, support groups, safety planning, court-based advocacy, transportation, assistance with securing basic needs and job training, and coordination with local law enforcement, civil legal assistance, among others.

One-time CSFRF Allocation to Address Victims' Safety Risks & Needs - \$2,900,000

We thank Governor Lamont for his proposal to allocate **\$2,900,000 in FY23 from the Coronavirus State Fiscal Recovery Fund (CSFRF) to the Department of Social Services (DSS) to address victims' safety risks and needs, which have been intensified by the pandemic**, and urge your support. This funding will assist CT Coalition Against Domestic Violence's (CCADV) 18 member organizations, including The Center for Family Justice, with providing critical assistance to victims including sheltering/hoteling, food, transportation costs, basic needs, childcare assistance, housing, moving, utilities, and furniture assistance.

Throughout the pandemic we have seen an increase in the complexity of issues facing survivors and financial support for direct client emergency needs, like those listed above, is a common request from survivors struggling to achieve financial independence from their abusers during the pandemic. For example, Mary came to our office in extreme crisis. Her husband, after years of verbal, emotional psychological and financial abuse, abruptly walked out. He left Mary and their children without any way to pay the rent, utilities, food, diapers and other basic needs. Mary's children are very young, and the offender always prevented Mary from working outside the home. She came to us desperate for assistance. This allocation of one-time pandemic relief funding will allow our service system to provide much needed emergency assistance to survivors struggling to achieve financial independence from their abusers during the pandemic.

In addition to the emergency financial needs of survivors, this funding will assist with the ongoing emergency housing needs of survivors fleeing their abusive homes. For years Connecticut's domestic violence shelters have functioned well-above capacity with an average utilization rate of 122% between fiscal years 2016 and 2020, meaning shelters were overflowing year-round. But with the pandemic, shelter utilization has seen a sharp increase and the cost has skyrocketed due to the need to rely more heavily on the use of hoteling to properly social distance existing shelter space.

From March of 2020 through December 2020, our hotel nights increased by 128% and we spent \$50,000 on emergency hotel stays for clients. In FY21, we spent an additional \$144,513 on emergency hotel stays. These are staggering, and impossible to predict numbers for an organization of our size.



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To date, we have received various pandemic relief funds through both DSS and the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, as well as having the opportunity to leverage private philanthropic dollars. However, we anticipate that hoteling will continue as a significant cost through FY23. Additional one-time CSFRF will be critical to addressing the ongoing emergency shelter and emergency financial needs of survivors.

Annual Funding to Support Domestic Violence Child & Family Advocates - \$1,440,000

In addition to supporting the Governor's proposal for use of CSFRF to assist survivors, we're calling on the General Assembly to allocate **annual funding in the amount of \$1,440,000 to fund 18 domestic violence child & family advocates across the state** at CCADV's member organizations, including one here at The Center for Family Justice. Connecticut currently does not provide any state funding to support this critical role within the domestic violence service system. This request is also included in Senate Bill 5.

As the pandemic has stretched on longer than any of us originally anticipated, the secondary effects of this global crisis continue to play out in communities and homes across Connecticut. Much attention has rightfully been paid to the impact of the pandemic on the mental health and social-emotional development of children. This concern is only heightened for those children who, on top of dealing with pandemic isolation, have been experiencing domestic violence in their homes.

It is well documented that witnessing violence or experiencing violence can be extremely traumatic for children. It can affect a child's development to have their brain in a constant state of stress. (refer to work of Jack P. Shonkoff, M.D. at Center on the Developing Child, Harvard University, www.developingchild.harvard.edu). Many of these children will begin to mimic the abusive parent's behavior as they get older. They being to become aggressive and may exhibit bullying behaviors. Others will assume the role of victim in their own relationships.

And so, the intergenerational cycle of violence goes on and on. We can continue to focus on reactive services to crisis situations or we can begin to focus on prevention through breaking the generational cycle of violence and intervening before these children become abusers or victims themselves. The role of the child and family advocate is to help children overcome trauma, build resilience and increase their hopefulness about the future. Chan Hellman, a researcher of hope theory at the University of Oklahoma, states, "a person with hope has the ability to create a mental roadmap to reach a goal as well as the willpower needed to overcome obstacles as they arise." (see www.ou.edu/cas/socialwork/faculty-staff/chan-hellman). If we want to see real impact on the prevention of domestic violence in Connecticut, this is where we shift our focus. We ensure that children exposed to violence in their homes, and the non-offending parent, have access to highly trained, trauma-informed advocates who can help to interrupt the cycle of violence, create healing and provide hope.

I would like to share with you a real-life example of how providing child victims with support from a dedicated child and family advocate can change everything. Sarah, who spent years raising children of her own, finally enjoyed working and living independently. That abruptly ended, when Sarah received emergency custody of her 10-year-old nephew Robert and 9-year-old niece Rachel. Robert and Rachel experienced significant abuse in their home and Sarah knew that she needed to help. However, Sarah also knew that she could not provide her niece and nephew with the counseling and support they truly needed to heal. She brought them to The Center for Family Justice where both children worked with a child and family advocate.



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During their sessions both Robert and Rachel disclosed a lack of outside engagement with school, no engagement with their peers, difficulty trusting adults and an overall lack of hope for their future. Through ongoing counseling sessions, both Robert and Rachel began to unpack the years of trauma and heal. They began to learn how to build healthy and trusting relationships. Both children attended CFJ's Camp Hope America program and became engaged in our yearlong Pathways to HOPE engagement program. The began to reengage with school and friends. Rachel discovered a love of writing and participates in a storytelling group where youth build, create and write an original story. At the completion of the program Rachel was the co-author of a published book. Robert has a love of science and has joined a STEMgineers program where he continues to build his critical thinking, problem solving, creative and collaborative skills.

Rachel and Robert still have a great deal of work ahead of them as they heal from the traumas they have experienced. Years of abuse cannot be unraveled in a short period of time. But having access to a highly trained, skilled, trauma-informed child and family advocate has changed the course of these children's lives and given them an opportunity to break free from the cycle of abuse.

Currently, federal pass-through funds in the amount of \$11,500 support only about a quarter of the cost of a full-time advocate. For The Center for Family Justice, that means that we must use dollars from annual appeal campaigns, private donations and events to cover the additional costs of having a full-time child-advocate. In the end, even with our efforts to cobble together the position of child & family advocate, we know that we can't truly dedicate the time we need to fully meet the needs of all children experiencing domestic violence in the Greater Bridgeport region.

If these devastating personal consequences of domestic violence are not enough to sway opinion, we can also consider the many costs to society. According to the CDC, "the lifetime economic cost associated with medical services for domestic violence related injuries, lost productivity from paid work, criminal justice and other costs was \$3.6 trillion.

As we begin to come out of the pandemic, we are concerned that there will be a large influx of children presenting with significant need to various systems, including the domestic violence service system. We must be prepared to meet the needs of these most vulnerable victims. Adequate state funding is needed to properly support a full-time advocate at each of the state's 18 domestic violence organizations, including The Center for Family Justice. We have always said and continue to say that domestic violence is preventable, learned behavior. For a small amount of annual funding (less than 0.01% of the overall state budget), we have the opportunity to create real outcomes in the prevention of domestic violence. We can ensure that our children are free to live happy, healthy lives free from abuse.

Thank you for your consideration.

Respectfully,

Angela Schlingheyde
Angela Schlingheyde, J.D.
Director of Civil Legal & Court Advocacy Services
The Center for Family Justice, Inc.

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